DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 317 099 HE 023 148

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TITLE	Making Sense of Administrative Leadership. The "L" Word in Higher Education. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-HE-89-1
PUB DATE	89
CONTRACT	RI88062014
NOTE	3p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Higher Education Reports, The George Washington University, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1181 ($1.00).
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Administrator Effectiveness; *College Administration; *College Presidents; Higher Education; *Leadership; Leadership Qualities; Leadership Styles
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

The digest is based on a full length report (with the same title) on leadership in higher education. The full report provides a definitive review of the literature and institutional practice on the topic. Recent scholars have new ideas challenging traditional notions that organizations are driven by leadership or that the quality of leadership greatly affects organizational performance. Research traditions in leadership can be grouped into six categories of theories: trait, power and influence, behavioral, contingency, cultural and symbolic, and cognitive. One useful organizational typology from the perspective of leadership suggests that organizations can be viewed from four vantage points (structural, human resources, political, and symbolic frames). Study of leadership in colleges and universities is problematic because of the dual control systems, conflicts between professional and administrative authority, unclear goals, and other properties of professional organizations. Leadership in higher education can be examined from the perspective of leadership theories and organizational frames, though an explicit conceptual orientation is absent in many of the works. Contemporary works indicate understanding of leadership in academic organizations may be undergoing a paradigmatic shift from a rational perspective toward a cultural and symbolic perspective. Cultural and symbolic theories deserve serious attention because they present a view of leadership that is highly compatible with the characteristics of academic organizations. Contains 9 references. (SM)

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ERIC DIGEST

EDO-HE-89-1

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Making Sense of Administrative Leadership: The 'L' Word in Higher Education

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Why Do We Need Leadership?

A perception exists that higher education is experiencing a "great leadership crisis." Calls for better, stronger, more visionary, and bolder leadership intensified after the publication of several reports by blue ribbon commissions, whose running theme is "the decline of higher education." **To Reclaim a Legacy** (Bennett 1984) challenges presidents to be more courageous in assuming the role of leadership in curricular reform. And **Integrity in the College Curriculum** declares that "this generation of academic presidents and deans is required to lead us away from the declining and devalued bachelor's degree" (AAC 1985, p. 7).

The message in these and other reports on the state of higher education is that official campus leaders—presidents and other academic officers—need to direct and guide their campuses if the problems of higher education are to be confronted and resolved. This faith in the power and wisdom of leadership and its potential to make a difference in colleges and universities underlies much of the literature of higher education and is particularly ubiquitous in contemporary and highly popular works on leadership. Recently, however, scholars have posited new ideas that challenge traditional notions that organizations are driven by leadership or that the quality of leadership significantly affects organizational performance.

What Is Leadership?

Research traditions in leadership can be grouped into six major categories: **trait theories**, which attempt to identify specific personal characteristics that appear to contribute to a person's ability to assume and successfully function in positions of leadership; **power and influence theories**, which consider leadership in terms of the source and amount of power available to leaders and the manner in which leaders exercise that power over followers through either unilateral or reciprocal interactions; **behavioral theories**, which study leadership by examining patterns of activity, managerial roles, and behavior categories of leaders—that is, by considering what it is that leaders actually do; **contingency theories**, which emphasize the importance of situational factors, such as the nature of the task performed by a group or the nature of the external environment to understand effective leadership; **cultural and symbolic theories**, which study the influence of leaders in maintaining or reinterpreting the systems of shared beliefs and values that give meaning to organizational life; and **cognitive theories**, which suggest leadership is a social attribution that permits people to make sense of an equivocal, fluid, and complex world.

One of the most useful organizational typologies from the perspective of leadership suggests that organizations can be looked at through four different vantage points or coherent perspectives, identified as "frames" (Bolman and Deal 1984). The **structural frame** emphasizes formal roles and relationships, the **human resource frame** focuses on the needs of people, the **political frame** considers the conflict over scarce resources, and the **symbolic frame** views organizations as cultures with shared values.

Is Leadership in Higher Education Different?

Even though the literature on leadership and organizational theory is rich, its many conceptual orientations and interpretations do not appear to be particularly influential, at least not explicitly, in informing the literature on administrative leadership in higher education. Much of this work tends to be atheoretical, with considerable attention given to style of leadership and personality traits.

The study of leadership in colleges and universities is problematic because of the dual control systems, conflicts between professional and administrative authority, unclear goals, and other special properties of normative, professional organizations. Leadership in higher education can be examined from the perspective of leadership theories and organizational frames, however, even though an explicit conceptual orientation is absent in many of the works.

Research and commentaries on the presidency suggest that presidents tend to accept a traditional and directive view when they define their leadership role; few appear to emphasize the importance of two-way communication or social exchange processes of mutual influence or to identify leadership as facilitating rather than directing the work of highly educated professionals. Furthermore, few works have considered the possibility that the debate about transformational versus transactional may not be purely an "either/or" and that both perspectives may be useful but in a more complex configuration.

How Are Our Views of Leadership Changing?

Several contemporary works indicate that the understanding of leadership in academic organizations, at least among scholars, may be undergoing a paradigmatic shift, from a rational perspective toward a cultural and symbolic perspective. Close attention is being given to the manifestation of symbolic leadership, as shown by works concerning the role of college presidents in the management of meaning, the construction of institutional reality, and the interpretation of myths, rituals, and symbols. For the most part, however, cultural and symbolic views of leadership have not been incorporated

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into the practitioners' perspective of higher education administration, perhaps because it tends to present the leader in a role that is considerably more modest than seen in images of heroic or transformational leadership associated with rational and power-based theories.

Cultural and symbolic theories deserve serious attention because they present a view of leadership that is highly compatible with the characteristics of academic organizations. The ambiguity of purpose, the diffusion of power and authority, and the absence of clear and measurable outcomes are but a few of the constraints faced by college presidents and other administrative leaders. Viewed from a rational perspective, these constraints make the presidency appear as an impossible job. Presidents who consider their role from a symbolic perspective will be less concerned about displaying bold leadership to leave their imprint on a campus, more concerned with making marginal improvements and helping campus constituents make sense of an equivocal world.

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This publication was partially prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED RI-88-062014. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the department.

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